

THOUGHTS AT NIGHT

By KURT E. WOLFF

The following pages, which came into our hands recently, were written by a young German officer. The writer is neither a philosopher nor an author: he is a lieutenant in a Panzer regiment. But his groping words give us some rare insight into the great change taking place in the souls of those men who have been in the thick of battle for the last four and a half years.—K.M.

THROUGHOUT the day a gale had been blowing, and our hair was gritty and our faces encrusted with sweat and dust. Then the sun set in a fiery glow and the wind calmed down. Darkness and silence settled on the wide plain.

But hardly had the stars begun to twinkle when we heard the deep drone of the British bombers. While we were still sipping our hot tea from the field kitchen and smoking a cigarette, the dazzling magnesium parachutes were already floating over our heads, turning the young night into day again. Tired but sleepless, we stood in our turrets, staring out into the hellish night. For three, four, five hours the bombs crashed, sometimes near, sometimes far off, but always there was a flare of fire somewhere, coloring the dust clouds rising from the bomb craters red and yellow. Not until toward morning did the attacks gradually subside, so that we could close our inflamed eyelids for a little sleep.

In nights like that a lot of things fade in importance. During the day there had been an engagement; my tank had been hit and my driver seriously wounded. And now in the night, when we had hoped for rest, the British bombers were roaring overhead. There were some men who cursed the day and the night and the whole world, who stood exhausted, staring in front of them, no longer grasping what was happening around them. There was suffering and sometimes perhaps even horror; and sometimes the thoughts rising from such harassed hearts can no longer see any meaning. Dark

questions assail one, and they become more difficult to answer every night. Yet the answers must be clear and strong so that they may not blow away like fog in the first breeze of morning.

Where is the meaning?

Oh, it is no use to say that it was not we who began this war. Or to say that it is a matter of safeguarding the life of our tormented nation. No, we know all that, we know what we are fighting for. We know about the Anglo-American plans, about the intrigues and intentions of the Bolsheviks, about principles and order and chaos. No, we know all that and have explained these things to each other in long conversations. But what is behind all that, what is even more profound, so profound that even death can no longer mock at it: that is what we do not know.

When there are only a few tanks in our section—some having been left behind, shot to pieces, with dead comrades in them—and when thirty, forty enemy tanks appear on the opposite slope, accompanied by antitank guns and field artillery, when we are thus outnumbered and the order comes for us to attack: then we no longer think of great slogans, however true they may be. But we always have the courage of our hearts to help us. The lieutenant takes the lead, and his men follow him, as they are accustomed to do. Later, however, when night falls and each man is alone with himself in the raging darkness, his thoughts begin to overpower him.

Where is the meaning?

One man has asked me, and another. Two men, but one question. And one heart, too, I believe.

A night watch is long; often one feels that it will never end. There is ample time for thinking, for brooding.

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I shall try to explain it, although perhaps, like any faith, it cannot be explained at all. One can only speak in metaphors of what one thinks, in allegories, and hope that the other will discover the meaning in the metaphor. And also: one must have experienced it, already know it in one's heart, in order to comprehend it.

When I first drove into France in my tank, I was a different man from the one I am today. It was there, on the battlefields of Arras, where my father, too, has lain buried at the side of a road for more than twenty years, that it began. The storm of the battle embraced us and tried to change us.

But we were still too strong, and victory came too fast. Hence it was only a beginning, and we did not experience all of it. We had set out as young men full of faith, and we returned, tanned by the sun, with the feeling of having, through our surplus of strength, done a deed to which we were entitled. We were the victors.

But then it went on. For some in Africa and Italy, for others in Russia. And for each and every one there came, at one time or another, the feeling of horror. And having passed through horror, we came out differently, changed. We had dropped all that was nonessential, all that we had acquired by training, by living, by study, and what remained was only what really counted, was the heart.

As the moon now rises, a narrow silver crescent turning the land around us white and our tanks black, I know what it is: we have become simple.

I remember that hard battle when my friend fell and lay smashed on the ground beside me; when two young lieutenants were burned alive in their turrets; when

finally no one could make headway any more against the almost unassailable enemy position. At last only our commander advanced in his tank, calling us all to his side with a stern order. And all those apparently exhausted men made one more attack, truly with the courage of those who have finished with life. And took the position.

There was this battle and another. Time and place, what do they mean? But time and place gave us that vast change in our hearts. Now we are no longer the smiling youngsters who drove across the blooming fields of France: now we are changed men, men of another time which has not yet come but will come one day.

The moon is now at its zenith, and the shadows have grown shorter. And the stars have paled slightly because of its brilliance. But on our right and left there are red flames which cast blacker shadows than the mild light of the moon and the stars. The men of the supply corps are lying in their holes, awake and waiting. In the distance a heavy AA battery is barking away, tracing the sky with white points of fire.

When we get home, we think, when we get home, an entirely new life will begin, the simple life. Shall we be able still to become angry at all the thousand little annoyances, we who have come through the war? We shall smile. Perhaps we shall not be understood, not entirely, and people will say that we have lost our feeling for everyday life, that we are still living in the past. But the truth will be that we shall have conquered that which is small, confused, nonessential, that we shall have entered upon a new life. Those who have gone through the fire can no longer be touched by these things.

We have become simple, and all has become simple to us. We see all events through new eyes, even the future. This gives us a deep sense of happiness, which nobody can destroy. Our faces may have become hard, but when we return to our little sons we shall laugh with tears in our eyes.

We know that in the lives of peoples, too, there will be simplicity. Europe had become a confused affair, with borders without meaning, treaties which were in contradiction to life, peoples who infringed upon the holy heart of the earth. Now one day new laws will be set up, simple laws, based on reason and on the heart, as God wills. Hatred will not disappear—we are not dreamers—but, as the new laws gain ground, the much-maligned European continent will recover, as will the rest of the world.

In this dark night the British bombers are still circling overhead, pursuing our supply columns. The struggle is not yet ended, but, just the same, it has already been decided, decided in our hearts.

The front stretches endlessly; and, when we moved day and night to penetrate deep into the enemy's rear, only the sun and the stars had been with us. There was only a compass direction and a narrow track. Those who wandered off that track got lost. But those who kept to these simple things were there when they were needed. The red ball of the sun rose over the new day and, as we recognized the enemy on the opposing slope, the order came to attack.

Now that it was light we laughed again and fell into line with our tanks. Nothing could exhaust us, neither fire nor questions. Those who are transformed by death and have won a new life for themselves have become so simple that there is nothing that can shake them. It is said that that which does not destroy makes stronger. Strength is always founded in simplicity. This is the strength the war has given us.

I have spoken about it with my men. And there are many who understand. For it is not a philosophy which must be pressed into a system: it is only the meaning that has come to us through the war. To be simple, when we get home, in everything; to have simple pleasures and simple happiness again, to take pleasure in flowers, trees, children. How

we shall enjoy seeing the birches again in our home village! How we shall be received again by the tall cathedrals and by the old songs which we had almost forgotten. The other day someone began to sing one of the old songs, and many more joined in, and it was like an entirely new melody.

And how we shall look at the stars, which we have learned to love here, those shining lights in the dome above us. No one can forget them who has passed through the fire.

Thus war is to us not a destroyer but a transformer. Now that we are so close to death we have really begun to understand life. Before—but we have forgotten all that was before. All our longing goes out to the future. Our love will be new, and our faith. We lost all our bonds and won them again entirely new.

And this change is reaching out beyond the individual, we know. What is happening today is only a beginning and inadequate, as all beginnings are; but the life of the nations will become new too. The fact that the nations are uniting today is only an outward happening, but it is an indication. The holy heart of the earth will open the eyes even of those who are still blind.

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Now the moon is in the west, and on the other side the red sun is rising out of the plain. The night is over, and the tanks are getting ready for combat. There is still much to be done before the meaning of our days is fulfilled.

The wind, too, that has rested so long, is rising again. From the left, where a scattered company is forming up again, yellow clouds of dust blow across. The motors of our tanks are throbbing, and radio signals whistle in our earphones.

Gradually the English batteries begin their concert again. But they cannot stop us. Their time is measured, ours is still ahead.